Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages | Commissariat aux langues officielles

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Urgent need to increase French content on the Internet: An appeal to the Government of Canada

The Commissioner of Official Languages, Dr. Dyane Adam, today released two studies on linguistic duality and the Internet. The studies were made public at a day of debates and conferences held as part of the Initi@tives 99 symposium, organized by the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie, in partnership with the Centre international pour le développement de l'inforoute en français (CIDIF) and the Université de Moncton, campus d'Edmundston (UMCE).

The first study, entitled *The Government of Canada and French on the Internet* is a call for immediate and more focused action by the Government of Canada in order to increase French content on the Internet. The profound impact of the Internet on services delivered by the federal government, on the development of a knowledge-based economy, on the digital revolution in communications and on Canadian society as a whole are what prompt the Commissioner to launch, today, an urgent appeal to the federal government to affirm linguistic duality - one of the cornerstones of Canadian identity - as one of the guiding principles for the development of the Canadian presence on the Internet, by means of targeted investments and a coherent strategy. The Commissioner requests that the Clerk of the Privy Council respond to this study, on behalf of the government, by December 1, 1999.

The Canada of tomorrow must ensure that French holds an equitable place on the Internet in order to truly apply the *Official Languages Act* and to ensure the equality of status of French and English, as proclaimed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. "With the Sommet de la Francophonie only a few days away, and given that it's theme is centred on youth, who represent our future, it is important that the Government of Canada respond to this appeal," declared the Commissioner.

The special study's twelve recommendations aim to accelerate the development of and improve access to French-language content on the Internet through an increased volume of translated and digitized documents and through free access to linguistic tools and resource banks.

The second study made public today by the Commissioner, entitled *Use of the Internet by Federal Institutions*, is a follow-up to a special study published in 1996. This new study notes that some progress has been made in terms of respecting language obligations. However, certain problems remain, such as certain Internet addresses (URLs or file names) not complying with the *Official Languages Act*, information not being published simultaneously in both official languages and mediocre French-language quality on certain government sites.

In releasing these two studies, Dr. Adam declared, "Given that the English-language is predominant on the Internet, it is important for us to remain vigilant to ensure that French takes its equitable place so that, at the dawn of the new millennium, French-speaking Canadians may take full advantage of this powerful communication tool."

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Information

Commissioner's Representatives

Recommendations

The Government of Canada and French on the Internet

List of Recommendations

The Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that the Government of Canada:

1. ensure that any federal government policy framework or initiative pertaining to the Internet affirms linguistic duality as one of its guiding principles and includes the obligation to create a volume of information of sufficient quality and pertinence to ensure fruitful exchanges in French.

2. by July 1, 2000, develop an integrated strategy with regard to the presence and quality of French-language content and services on the Internet and control procedures to ensure its effective implementation.

3. open a window on Canada's linguistic duality to the rest of the world and to this end strengthen the trend of co-operation with the institutions, states and member governments of the Francophonie for the sharing of knowledge and the complementarity of projects so that French may to an even greater extent be an international language of access to culture and technology.

4. increase resources so as to significantly augment, by the year 2002, the expertise necessary to deal with the volume and quality of translation of documents of federal departments and agencies to be posted on the Internet.

5. provide additional resources so as to significantly increase, by the year 2002, the quality and the volume of digitized documents of federal departments and agencies in French to be posted on the Internet.

6. create a portal introducing and describing all of the artistic and cultural, economic and financial and scientific and technical sites of the Government of Canada and promote the development of many electronic links with non-profit agencies.

7. improve the Web servers of federal government sites so as to take into account the language negotiation feature and facilitate searches in both official languages.

8. promote research and development of linguistic tools in both official languages in order to further develop the language industry in Canada.

9. make available without charge on the Internet, the terminology banks, bilingual and specialized search modules and linguistic transfer tools that are the property of the Government of Canada.

10. in co-operation with all the departments and agencies concerned, develop a bank of

resources on the Internet for learning English and French as second languages.

11. develop and implement an investment strategy to promote the expansion of private sector and non-profit agencies working in the areas of French-language content and services.

12. develop or promote the development of a portal on the Internet to make information on the member states of the Francophonie more easily accessible.

Recommendations

Use of the Internet by Federal Institutions

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the period 1996-1999, the Internet has assumed a large role, both in terms of a medium by which the Canadian public may be served and as an effective working tool for public servants. From an official languages perspective, we have indeed entered a world substantively different from that which existed just three short years ago.

In 1996, French-speaking Canadians encountered significant technical problems in using the Internet. Because of competing coding systems, it was difficult to send electronic mail (including file attachments) that contained accented text. Browser software was not readily available in French and it was difficult to input search engines with words containing accents. Today, as witnessed by the information gathered during the course of this follow-up, we are pleased to indicate that these technological issues have largely been resolved.

Moreover, what has become evident is that the Internet is now, from an official languages perspective, a medium like any other. The nature of the Internet complaints which this Office has received, e.g. inequality of status of French and English, poor quality of French text, failure to publish simultaneously in both languages, are now no different in substance than those attributable to other communications media. Thus it appears from our findings that the only outstanding technical problem in terms of service to the public, and an ongoing concern of this Office, involves Internet addresses. As already mentioned, the Commissioner has brought this matter to the attention of the Treasury Board. Moreover, an objective of Common Look and Feel is to examine how best to ensure that government Web-site and e-mail addresses comply with the OLA.

As already noted in this report, the linguistic quality of material published on the Internet was found in some cases to be lacking in its translated version. The same has been said of material published internally on the intranet. This has been attributed in some instances to the lack of translation resources, managers having not foreseen the increase in the number of documents being published on Internet. We share the view expressed by institutions that responsibility for the quality of content rests with the program division producing the document. Hence we believe that responsible managers ought to include, in their financial resource planning, funds to be allocated specifically for translation and revision of material intended for publication on the Internet or intranet.

As to language of work, the following problems persist. Employees in some cases are not offered Internet and related software in the official language of their choice and they have not been provided with adequate information on Internet-related policies. Moreover, there are delays in obtaining Internet training in French, and training, as well as technical and help-desk support, are sometimes not available or not of comparable quality in both official languages.

The Commissioner therefore recommends that Treasury Board:

1. actively seek a solution to the problem of non-compliance with the *Official Languages Act* of Internet addresses (URLs or file names) which is acceptable to all federal institutions.

Treasury Board Secretariat agrees that a solution to this issue must be found. It informs us that this issue is presently being examined by its Internet Advisory Committee's working group on official languages. Proposed solutions will also be discussed within the context of the Common Look and Feel initiative.

The Commissioner further recommends that federal institutions:

2. ensure that their Internet presence, in terms of both language of service and language of work, conforms to the same official languages standards as those governing any other communications medium;

3. ensure that sufficient funds are allocated for translation and revision of material destined for publication on both the Internet and the intranet so that it be published in both official languages simultaneously;

4. ensure that a) employees receive Internet and related software installations for their workstations in the official language of their choice; and b) that Internet training, as well as technical and help-desk support, are provided in both official languages and that these are of equal quality;

5. provide employees with the Treasury Board policy relating to the use of official languages on electronic networks (including any amendments or additions thereto).

This follow-up study will no doubt be the last that specifically addresses the technological aspects of the Internet as they relate to official languages issues. That said, federal institutions must remain ever diligent to ensure that on this medium, the equality of Canada's two official languages is assured. As such, the recommendations issued pursuant to this report will be followed up in the context of other studies the Office undertakes.

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